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DEPARTMENT FOR DS/IP/AF, DS/TIA/ITA, OSAC, AND AF/E

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SUBJECT: ANNUAL OVERSEAS SECURITY ADVISORY COUNCIL (OSAC)
CRIME AND SAFETY REPORT

REF: 08 STATE 132056

¶1. The following unclassified crime and medical information is provided for the OSAC public website. Responses are keyed to Reftel.

¶I. Overall Safety and Crime Environment

¶A. Post continues to receive reports of violent crime in Eritrea. According to Eritrean police, local sources, and other diplomatic contacts, there continues to be an increase in street crimes, pickpocketing, robberies, residential burglaries, vehicle break-ins, and assaults. There are also been an increase in the number of incidents involving emotionally disturbed persons (EDPs) in parts of Asmara where Westerners live, eat, and frequent. These EDPs have assaulted Westerners and Eritreans in the past. RSO continues to receive reports of break-ins at both Western and Eritrean residences. Thus far they have been limited to residences that do not have 24/7 guard presence. There have been no break-ins at any U.S. Embassy residences in several years. Hotels have generally proven to be safe for visitors.

¶B. Road Safety: The road conditions on the primary roads in the city of Asmara are generally adequate but the overall condition of the secondary roads continues to decline and residents in many neighborhoods have taken to filling potholes themselves. Driving in Asmara can be hazardous due to the many pedestrians and bicyclists who seem oblivious to the vehicle traffic. As gas has become increasingly expensive, the numbers of bicyclists has increased dramatically. Pedestrian and bicyclist behavior changes little at night and safety items such as lights and reflectors are seldom used. Vehicles frequently travel without using headlights at night in an effort to save gas. Motorists should use extreme caution during hours of darkness. Roads outside of Asmara are in poor condition and except for the major ones between cities, unpaved. The roads are winding with numerous switchbacks, steep embankments, and no shoulders. The Asmara-Massawa road is notorious for horrific accidents due to the heavy truck traffic and blind corners. For several months during the winter, fog on the most mountainous stretches of the road reduces visibility to near zero, particularly in the afternoon and evening. The embassy recommends that travel outside of Asmara be undertaken only during daylight.

II. Political Violence in Eritrea

¶A. Historical Perspective: Post continues to receive reports of Eritreans yelling anti-American or other derogatory phrases at either Americans or other westerners who are perceived to be Americans. The Government of the State of Eritrea (GSE) continues to run anti-American articles in its state owned/controlled media. However, the majority of Eritreans do not appear to be anti-American. As in any foreign setting, visitors to Eritrea must remain aware of their surroundings at all times and avoid confrontational events whenever possible.

¶B. Regional Terrorism and Organized Crime: The GSE has reported their officials have been victims of attacks in northern and western Eritrea by indigenous groups such as the

Eritrean Islamic Jihad or other dissident groups supported by Ethiopia and Sudan. There are continuous reports of explosions due to unknown individuals placing mines along roads outside of Asmara. The UN and the USG have travel restrictions prohibiting their personnel from going to dangerous areas.

1C. International or Transnational Terrorism: The GSE has provided sanctuary for members of the former Council of Islamic Courts (CIC) inside Eritrea, including to Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys who has affiliation with the reportedly defunct Al Ittihad Al Islamia (AIAI). He was publicly reported as being in Asmara as late as November 2008. The GSE reportedly has provided regional groups such as the Sudanese Liberation Movement (SLM), the Sudanese Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), and the Alliance for the Reliberation of Somalia (ARS) with a wide range of logistical support such as Eritrean passports. The GSE professes it would know if foreign terrorist groups such as Al-Qaida were present in Eritrea. However, Eritrea has a long, porous land border with Sudan and an extensive border on the Red Sea. With limited security resources to adequately patrol these borders, Post assumes groups would be able to unofficially enter/transit through Eritrea through one of these borders without the GSE's knowledge.

1D. Civil Unrest: Widespread civil unrest and disorder would be met with brutal force by the GSE. There have been no demonstrations against any USG facility in recent history.

III. Post Specific Concerns

1A. Landmines, including ones that were newly laid in 2008, and unexploded ordinance litter the countryside and cause sporadic injuries and death. Although some de-mining efforts have taken place, areas that are not well traveled, especially in the north and west, are potentially dangerous. The embassy recommends checking with local government and village officials before undertaking travel to remote areas or off the main roads. Travelers should exercise extreme caution and avoid secondary roads. Additionally, travelers should ensure that other traffic has recently passed over unimproved roads before traversing them.

1B. Increased military tensions along the Ethiopian and Djiboutian borders:
Tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea continue to be high and both sides have massed over 100,000 soldiers each along their shared border. In 06/2008 there were military skirmishes between Eritrea and Djibouti as well. Post has issued travel advisories advising Americans to avoid the border area. There have been sporadic reports of fighting between these two forces and reports of landmine explosions in these areas as well.

1C. Travel Restrictions: The GSE issued a decree in May 2006 that restricts all foreigners, including diplomats, to Asmara unless travel permits are obtained ten days in advance. The difficulties in obtaining travel permissions in a timely manner, or at all, severely limits the U.S. Embassy's ability to respond to U.S. citizen emergencies outside of Asmara. In recent months, the U.S. Embassy has received reports of difficulties experienced by U.S. citizens (official and private) in obtaining visas to travel to Eritrea. Visas cannot be obtained at the Asmara International Airport for most visitors and not without explicit approval by the GSE. Travelers are advised to allow adequate lead time when applying for a travel visa and should contact their nearest Eritrean Embassy for updated information on application and wait times.

1D. Vienna Convention: The GSE does not notify the U.S. Embassy in cases of U.S. citizen detention, in contravention of Vienna Convention obligations. American citizens of Eritrean origin are particularly vulnerable in cases of detention or emergency, as the Eritrean government has stated

it does not recognize the U.S. citizenship of dual nationals, regardless of whether the individual travels on an Eritrean or U.S. travel document. In several instances, the U.S. Embassy has only become aware of U.S. citizen problems long after the incident occurred. Visitors are advised to consult the latest consular information sheet and travel warning for Eritrea before planning travel. This information can be found on the State Department's website at <http://www.state.gov>.

IV. Eritrean Police Response:

1A. Police Detention or Harassment: If visitors encounter detention or harassment from the Eritrean police or Eritrean National Security Organization (ENSO), they should immediately report the incident to the Embassy's consular section and request guidance. Bilateral relations between the GSE and the USG are poor and Eritrean officials (including police officials) refuse to meet with Embassy officers. The Embassy's interaction with Eritrean police is extremely limited.

1B. Assistance For Crime Victims: The Eritrean police have been responsive when victims of crimes have requested assistance. However, the Embassy has no assurance that we would be notified by the GSE in the case of a U.S. citizen emergency or that the Embassy would be able to access U.S. citizens to render assistance outside of Asmara. The Eritrean police are poorly trained and plagued by a lack of resources such as radios and vehicles. In the past, Embassy Local Guard Force members have had to pick up Eritrean police and transport them to the scene of crimes involving Embassy personnel. There is no rapid response to any reports of crime. Investigative abilities by the Eritrean police are extremely basic and usually ineffective.

Crime Prevention unit: 291-1-12-52-29
Investigations unit: 291-1-11-54-02
Airport Security: 291-1-18-66-04.
1st Police Station: 291-1-127-799
2nd Police Station: 291-1-116-219
3rd Police Station: 291-1-114-942
4th Police Station: 291-1-159-159
5th Police Station: 291-1-151-118
6th Police Station: 291-1-115-551
7th Police Station: 291-1-186-370

1V. Medical Emergencies:

Medical facilities in Eritrea are inadequate by U.S. standards and are extremely limited. The Embassy medical policy is to stabilize and evacuate. However, evacuation options are extremely limited. A medical evacuation by private air ambulance requires an arrangement with off-shore companies and may take several days to arrange through the Eritrean authorities. Travelers are recommended to get adequate air ambulance evacuation insurance prior to arrival.

Travelers must bring their own medical supplies or prescription drugs and preventive medicines. Doctors and hospitals expect immediate cash payment for health care services. Malaria is prevalent in the coastal areas and in the western lowlands. Malaria prophylaxis is recommended when traveling to these areas. The following is a list of the most important medical contact numbers for Asmara. Travelers should check with the American Citizen Services Section at the U.S.

Embassy for the most current information.
Orota Hospital: 291-1-201-917 and 202-914
Sembel Hospital: 291-1-150-175
Selam Poly Clinic: 291-1-200-946 and 124-610
SOS USA: 1-800-523-6586
SOS London International: 00-44-20-8762-8133
SOS Geneva: 00-41-22-785-6464
Nairobi Air Ambulance: 00-254-2-315-454
Tricare Europe Chief - Healthcare Operations:

VI. Travel Precautions:

Armed robbery is rare in Asmara. Westerners and Embassy employees have been the victims of petty crimes and assaults in recent months. Americans and Westerners are perceived as being wealthy and as lucrative targets, particularly as the Eritrean economy continues to worsen. EDPs, vagrants, and beggars are becoming increasingly aggressive and belligerent towards perceived wealthy westerners. Visitors and residents are encouraged to exercise vigilance in their personal security measures as they would in any big U.S. city. Visitors should avoid flashing large sums of cash in crowded public areas. Eritrean law prohibits visitors from exchanging currency with unregistered street moneychangers and provides stiff mandatory penalties for violators, including incarceration.

VII. Further Information:

Contact Numbers for the U.S. Embassy:
Embassy main and after-hours number: 291-1-12-00-04
Regional Security Officer: 291-1-12-43-67
American Citizen Services: 291-1-12-03-42
Foreign Commercial Service: Not present.

VIII. OSAC Country Council

There is no formal OSAC in Asmara. The RSO regularly meets with security officials from other diplomatic missions to share information.

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